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ABSTRACT

One of the critical elements of effective schools developed as a result of recent reform efforts and restructuring processes was the concept of learning communities and learning circles. This short paper discusses learning communities and learning circles. It defines learning communities as "a fellowship of learners in which the teachers in a school and its leaders look for new and more effective means of practice and make changes based on what they have learned within this community." It defines learning circles as "small communities of learners among teachers and others who come together for the purpose of supporting each other in the process of learning." The paper describes learning communities, learning circles, the basic tenets of learning circles, the connections between learning communities and learning circles, the characteristics of learning circles, and the characteristics of learning communities. The paper concludes that learning circles serve as units of learning communities and can change a school's culture through building small communities of learners, using constructivist teaching methodology, supporting learners, documenting reflections on progress toward change, and evaluating collective expectations toward new paradigms of thinking about learning and teaching. (WFA)

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CREATING LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH CIRCLES OF LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift needed for schooling in the United States that began during reform efforts in recent decades has established the need for changes in both processes and functions of America's schools. One of the critical elements of effective schools developed as a result of this restructuring process was the concept of learning communities. These collaborative groupings represent a new model of schooling and bridge the divide between community and individualism by leading school administrators, teachers, and students to the edge of possibility for schools of the future (Caine & Caine, 1997). These authors perceived community building as the indispensable foundation for facilitating the emergence of a higher-order system within the nation's schools. Also in support of learning communities, Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, and Fernandez (1993) described a professional learning community as a fellowship of learners in which the teachers in a school and its leaders look for new and more effective means of practice and make changes based on what they have learned within this community. According to these authors, the imagined possibilities for increasing the capacity of schools require the development of professional learning communities that can serve as effective catalysts for school change and improvement.

The impetus toward the use of professional learning communities in American schools included the creation and use of professional standards that ensured that the use of standards is an important part of continuing reform efforts. One such requirement stated in Standard 5 of the Professional Teaching Standards ensures that, "Teachers are members of learning communities . . . ." (NBPTS, 1991). In addition, the system of total school improvement developed by the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) includes an emphasis on "community building" as one of NSSE's *Indicators of Schools of Quality*. This volume is a research-based, self-assessment guide for schools that are committed to continuous improvement and reveals ways in which "schools are helped to see how . . . the organizational conditions of their schools contribute to high quality teaching and learning (Fitzpatrick, 1997, p. xi). One of the NSSE organizational conditions necessary for meaningful changes in school is "Community Building," a critical process in school improvement that provides a clear focus on the quality of a school's learning community and requires schools to build and maintain such communities.

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Building learning communities has also been an important focus of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), an educational association concerned primarily with professional development in American schools, and learning communities are required components of the Context Standards under *NSDC Standards for Staff Development* (2002). Schools that meet these context standards are required to develop and maintain learning communities through the creation of new learning cultures. As indicated in this standard, NSDC recognized processes that organize adults into learning communities as powerful forms of staff development and indicated that processes used by schools to develop learning communities should create ongoing teams that meet regularly to learn, plan, and problem solve together in these communities.

In planning for the creation of an effective learning community, the most critical decisions that must be made by school administrators and teachers are to determine the most successful processes through which successful learning communities can be formed. According to Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, and Gagnon (1998), one of the most successful processes for building a true school community is the formation of small units within a school that serve as the building blocks that make up a learning community. These units that create school community involve the efforts of a small group of teachers who work together to make changes within their learning groups and eventually within the school itself. The building blocks that make up learning communities are called learning circles.

LEARNING CIRCLES

According to Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, and Gagnon (1998), "learning circles are small communities of learners among teachers and others who come together for the purpose of supporting each other in the process of learning" (p. 2). These authors based their model of learning circles on the following statement regarding the personal change that occurs in these collaborative groups. This process transforms each learner/teacher

> . . . when a learner is building community with other learners who are constructing knowledge through their own experience and supporting learners involved with them in documenting reflection on their experiences and assessing expectations agreed on as they are changing cultures in their classrooms, institutions, workplaces, or organizations," (p. xiii).

These six essential conditions for learning circles are necessary because they promote healthy communities of learners. In this model, building community and constructing knowledge are described as organizing conditions for learning circles, supporting learning and documenting reflection are seen as relevant conditions, while assessing expectations and changing cultures are termed adapting systems. The entire learning circle process is systematized into three phases that move healthy learning circles through these three sets of developmental stages that guide a learning community toward its growing, changing culture. The conceptual frame of the creators

of this unique group process reflects their strengths that allowed them to enrich their circle design with relevant theories, including living organizations, constructivist learning, group processes, complex systems, optimal experiences, and interdependent networks. In contrast, they define learning communities as large groups of people gathered intentionally for supporting each other in learning, including communities in higher education and many other areas.

Learning circles are comprised of four to six teachers (or other personnel) who use rituals to begin and end each circle session, share food provided by circle members, share personal and professional information to learn more about each other, and develop a unique culture that bonds the group together. Leadership is provided by all circle members on an equitable basis with no appointed leader. Within these circles, each member tells a "stepping stone" story in order to begin constructivist learning based on the characteristics and principles of learning derived from the collective stories of the members. Within this activity, teachers construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their own learning. The principles developed through this inductive process become the ideas that change the way that teachers think about teaching, who learn to *prepare for learning* instead of *planning for teaching*. Teachers then use what they have discovered about learning through the learning circle process and change their roles as guides on the side--not deliverers of knowledge. At this point, teachers support each other as they set new goals for their classes, try new methods for learning, and document their reflections by developing teaching portfolios or writing about their students' achievement. Learning circle members then assess their expectations, celebrate their successes, refine their methods, and sustain improvements. As a result of the process within the group, the circle's energy, enthusiasm, and success begins to change the culture of the school as a whole. When learning circles increase in number and quality, a true learning community begins to transform the culture of the school as it moves toward a clear focus on learning, reforming the school with planned, consistent changes.

BASIC TENENTS OF LEARNING CIRCLES

Learning circles are distinguished from traditional small group activities by their focus on learning communities made up of small groups of people who come together for the specific purpose of supporting each other in the process of learning. Some of the cornerstone beliefs of the authors that underlie their ideas include the following statements (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, & Gagnon, 1998).

• Small groups within the school become the important units in which teachers "first feel the power of belonging to a real community of learners" (p. xvi).

• There are no anointed leaders in a learning circle, allowing for individual autonomy and a mutual reciprocity between the circle group as all experience personal and organizational change.

• Small groups can successfully implement the six essential conditions more easily than a larger group.

• Learning is a change process that alters what you know by constructing patterns of action to solve problems of meaning.

• The power of the small group is that the members move from passive receivers of information to makers of knowledge.

• Teachers begin to truly understand the school's structure and culture through membership in a learning circle.

• The importance of this collaborative process hinges upon its role in providing both the time and context for deep and serious thinking about ourselves as teachers.

• Learning circles whose members are supported by each other can create a critical mass necessary to influence and change the organization.

• "Reform is done *to* an organization, but organizations don't think or change; individuals do" (p. xvi).

These combined tenets provide additional evidence of the mutuality between learning circles and communities and the likelihood that these symbiotic processes are effective in building successful and lasting school communities. Because professional development in any school should relate to learner-centered design principles (Hawley & Valli, 2000), the use of learning circles with teachers will "address the different problems that students may have in learning" (p. 7). The use of learning circles to focus teachers on constructivist models by involving them in the identification of what they need to learn to meet the needs of children. At this point, the learning process to be used will move a school quickly toward true community. As noted by these authors, direct engagement in the discovery process, "increases educators' motivation and commitment to learn, encourages them to take instructional risks, and assume new roles . . . " (p. 7). Learning circles can also reduce barriers to the implementation of new school programs by using linked learning circles to change the culture of a school by forming a close, supportive community, constructing knowledge more deeply through teamwork, providing support for learning through conversations with others, using structured reflections as learning

tools, assessing learner artifacts to reveal progress toward shared goals, and changing cultures through collective personal transformations (Funk, 2000).

The collective actions of existing learning circles within a school culture can be enhanced by the creation of cross-disciplinary learning circles in order to support the implementation plan that would result in "deep-rooted, thoughtful reforms, and approaches to familiar barriers " (Mach & Hord, 2000). Job-embedded professional development could be easily structured by scheduling blocks of time in a school schedule to allow learning circle groupings several hours a week to meet and construct their own learning in order to improve their teaching. This accommodation would allow teachers to work on learning circle activities more than 100 hours in a school year by providing significant job-embedded staff development that will directly affect the learning process of all students by working collaboratively to provide constructivist methods that will make learning meaningful, long-lasting, and fun.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN COMMUNITIES AND CIRCLES

Similarities between the processes of learning communities and learning circles reveal the promise of creating new cultures through the use of learning circles in order to build school-wide cultures that are collaborative, supportive, and effective in operationalizing the visions of these schools. In order to reveal the congruent nature between these communities and circles, a comparison of the characteristics of learning communities and learning circles is presented in Figure 1. These comparisons reveal similarities between learning communities and learning circles and their compatibility as processes, revealing the premise that these circles can serve as the foundation for larger learning communities.

Figure 1

Characteristics of Learning Circles	**Characteristics of Learning Communities**
Retaining individualism within a democratic group process with supportive circle members	Shared and Supportive
Constructing ideas through and debating issues and changing how teachers	Collective Learning and Sharing opinions

prepare for learning

Building and sharing a culture, developing core virtues, shaping covenants, and developing a vision for learning	Shared Values and Vision
Sharing rituals, life stories, areas of interest, and food; nurturing and respecting each other; and agreeing to core values	Supportive Conditions
Creating a culture of assessment, determining collective expectations, assessing individual progress, and demonstrating movement toward expectations	Shared Personal Practice
(Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, & Gagnon, 1998)	(Mack & Hord, 2000)

SUMMARY

Developing traditional schools into learning communities requires high-level professional development systems that will shape traditional schools into learning collaboratives in which learning circles build the infrastructure for these newly emerging learner-centered cultures. Using learning circles as building blocks for learning communities, teachers will no longer stay behind their classroom doors but will enter into a small group process with a strong theoretical base that can establish subcultures needed to create a learning community. These circles of learning seem tailor-made for such a effort that can make school reform a reality. Learning circles serve as units of learning communities and can change a school's culture through building small communities of learners, utilizing constructivist teaching methodology, supporting learners, documenting reflections on progress toward change, and evaluating collective expectations toward new paradigms of thinking about learning and teaching. School administrators and professional development leaders should discover the possibilities that

learning circles offer in providing a theoretically based approach to building a larger school community that is aligned with professional and regional accreditation standards. The promise of a new paradigm and true reform will depend upon newly created cultures that began as circles of learning and can produce meaningful and artful change in schooling.

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